



Dialectical Virtue: Dialogic Integrity through Paired Exemplars

Samantha Deane

Chris Higgins

This is an unpublished conference paper for the 12th Annual Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues conference at Oriel & Magdalene Colleges, Oxford University, Thursday 4th – Saturday 6th January 2024.

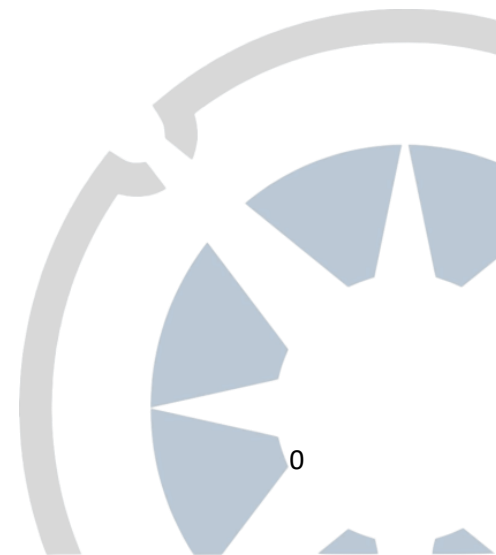
These papers are works in progress and should not be cited without author's prior permission.

Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues

University of Birmingham, Edgbaston, Birmingham, B15 2TT United Kingdom

T: +44 (0) 121 414 3602 F: +44 (0) 121 414 4875

E: jubileecentre@contacts.bham.ac.uk W: www.jubileecentre.ac.uk



Dialectical Virtue: Dialogic Integrity through Paired Exemplars

Samantha Deane, Boston College

Chris Higgins, Boston College

Abstract: Frequently, we hear that people become better by emulating the good conduct and character of others. As in most spheres of learning, showing beats telling. What is less well understood is what initiates do with the examples they encounter. The moral psychology of emulation—the who, what, and how of it—remains underdeveloped. Following Jonathan Lear, Michael Lamb, Bernard Williams, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Michael Oakeshott, we suggest a view of learning through emulation, that treats students as moral agents who can, indeed, must grapple with exemplars in context. We call this dialogic integrity and suggest a model where exemplars are engaged as dialogic pairs.

Introduction

Frequently, we hear that people become better by emulating the good conduct and character of others. And yet, we've all grappled with the obscurities of emulation. This is familiar terrain for any parent. With my 3-year-old at swim lessons, I'm often saying "Look, she's jumping into the water," with the implied message "please, be like her and jump in too." Emulate. Jump into the water. But, then on the playground, "Oh, no! We don't do what she did; we wait our turn." On the playground the message is transformed: don't emulate them, emulate me. Though analyses of exemplarity tend to focus on education of older children and adults who can reason, the example of parenting a newly social three-year-old casts a bright light on the mysteries of education via emulation.

For example, what is it that is being imitated? It is just behavior. Or is it behavior done for the right reasons? A whole way of being? When I tell my toddler to look at the other kids jumping into the pool, I do so under the assumption that she is fearful of jumping in and that seeing other kids jumping and laughing will inspire her to try it out. I want her to jump, and I know (though she might not) that my instruction to emulate is about far more than the simple act of jumping into the pool. On the playground another dimension unfolds. Suddenly in my quick parenting intervention there is a "we" and a "them." "We" is a hasty construct to differentiate the behavior of kind people who play well with others by taking turns. What does this make the "them?" Moreover, what am I teaching my daughter about how to makes sense of the imperfect, diverse, and developing humans with whom she must share the world? And let's not forget, she has a part to play here too. She is, in fact, generally unpersuaded by the real-life examples of people at the pool or on the playground and much more taken by the anthropomorphized trains, pigs, and horses in her books.

Much has been written about these pitfalls and obscurities of who should be an exemplar and what should be emulated. In their work on character education, Lamb, Brant and Books stake out a capacious vision of the exemplar. This exemplar can a) serve as a role model to emulate, b) as a counterfactual, and c) as an epistemic and moral prompt.¹ In fact, for Lamb et al., an exemplar can be any person living or dead who we can learn from and critically emulate. Their approach to

¹ Michael Lamb, "How Is Virtue Cultivated? Seven Strategies for Postgraduate Character Development," *Journal of Character Education* 17, no. 1 (January 1, 2021): 81–109.

learning character from exemplars rightfully foregrounds honesty about the reality of human striving. Thus, emulation itself may be read in different ways, for example as (1) as specific model to follow, or (2) as more general inspiration (“elevating our moral vision” Lamb et al say). Furthermore, Kristjánsson has highlighted potential misdirection on the aspirational highway: emulation can be experienced as aspirational identification (I could be like you) or as rivalrous disidentification, pitched either confidently (I can do even better) or a kind of shame that I fell short.²

In this paper we would like to raise a different issue. Exemplarity tends to singularize: Here is a courageous action or a courageous person. Emulate! But the moral life is about trying to clarify our vision, and one of the key distortions is a kind of foreshortening effect described by Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics*.³ Standing where the foolhardy person stands, at one end of the spectrum, courage (the mean) and cowardice (the other extreme) blur together. Putting fear in its proper place looks to the foolhardy person like giving fear too much weight in your deliberations. The foolhardy person sees a binary where he should see a tripartite moral geography. The mean is not just a goldilocks solution (just a little more fear, a little more, got it). Rather the mean is like a perpendicular path out of the blurring binary vision.

Finding the perpendicular path is the work of a lifetime; it requires dialogic encounters. The mean is not marked on any map. The moral life involves tacking as one encounters others’ embodied answers to the question, What is worth wanting? Aristotle says that we had better follow Calypso’s advice and steer clear of the more pressing danger: “that spray and surging breaker there—keep your ship well clear of that.”⁴ If we know that we have a tendency to give fear too much weight, first “we should drag ourselves away in the contrary direction.”⁵ If there is a capital V virtue at the mean, for us sailors of the moral life, tacking as best we can, there are two lower-case v virtues in every triad. These are the acts of recovery, the virtues of steering away from the surging breaker that stands nearest. To understand how an individual sailor is tacking, is to ascertain how she learned to be the kind of sailor she is; it is to study the diverse others that inspired her soul action.

In this spirit, our proposal might best be viewed as an investigation into what it looks to invite students into a conversation that foregrounds history, human striving, aspiration, and context. Exemplars play an inescapable role in human thought and action. As another philosopher of education, Bryan Warnick, puts it, “we cannot escape their influence even if we tried.”⁶ What to do? If humans cannot help but mirror the models around them (the cognitive research seem to suggest that this is at least part of the story), and mirroring is the wrong approach to character education through exemplars, how should an educator proceed?⁷ One answer, says Warnick, is to surround students with images and stories of human promoting civic good. Salience is constructed, as Warnick shows, by culture, tradition, and ethos, so it is one’s entire community (whether of place, faith,

² Kristján Kristjánsson, “Emulation and the Use of Role Models in Moral Education,” *Journal of Moral Education* 35, no. 1 (March 1, 2006): 37–49, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240500495278>.

³ See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, ed. Sarah Broadie, trans. Christopher Rowe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 120-21 (1108b20-36).

⁴ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 121 (1109a32).

⁵ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 122 (1109b5-6).

⁶ Bryan Warnick, “Heroes, Patriotic Education, and The Shadows of History,” *Philosophical Studies in Education*, 54 (2023). 85

⁷ Lehrer, “The Mirror Neuron Revolution: Explaining What Makes Humans Social,” *Scientific American*, accessed December 16, 2023, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-mirror-neuron-revolution/>.

practice, learning, politics, etc.), in a sense, is working alongside the exemplar proper to frame the action or trait as an example that *tells*.⁸

To these solutions we offer a third suggestion, one that treats students as moral agents who will, over their course of their life, need to grapple with their moral agency. We call this dialogic integrity. We suggest that in addition to surrounding students with loads of interesting examples of humans striving for the civic good and explicit conversations about the virtues, a student's moral agency is dependent on the extent to which she is invited into a conversation, a dialogue, about how characters come to be. Homing in on the dialogue between characters but also between the student and these characters, we offer a picture of exemplarity that is contingent on straining to see the exemplar as a moral agent whose projects are in part dependent on the projects of others.

One way that exemplarity might work in light of this dialectical nature of the moral life is that the examples themselves are dialectically paired. In the following two sections we consider a dialectical pair of exemplars from Homer's *Illiad*, Priam and Achilles. Both angry and both attempting to recover the mean in relation to anger, Priam and Achilles demonstrate two modes of recovery. As always, Aristotle lists two vices here: being hotheaded or phlegmatic. The idea is to feel anger at the right things in the right ways to the right degree. Our reason urges us to count to ten. But also, our *thumos*, or spiritedness, reminds us to raise our voice and say "stop" when someone repeatedly pokes us in the chest and backs us from a spot we need to occupy. Priam controls his anger to do what he must do. His is the virtue of the recovering hothead. Achilles finds his *thumos* to avenge Patroclus. His is the virtue of the recovering phlegmatic. Our thesis is this: when read as individuals, neither Priam's nor Achilles' recovery is intelligible. Interpreted as individuals Priam becomes a hero and Achilles the villain. This binarized reading further obscures the perpendicular path out of the fog. Soul action is catalyzed in context and dialogue. Together Priam and Achilles illustrate dialogic character of the moral life.

Priam the Exemplar

In "Exemplars at the End of the World," Jonathan Lear returns to the topic he richly explored in *Radical Hope*, what ethical-existential resources we may draw upon when our moral-practical worlds—our very matrices of meaning and value—themselves begin to unravel.⁹ Here, rather than bring Aristotle into dialogue with Plenty Coups and the world-disintegrating forced removal of the Crow, Lear works with one of Aristotle's own examples, that of King Priam in Homer. If we view the *Nicomachean Ethics* as a theoretical treatise, then Priam is meant to illustrate a specific aspect of Aristotle's view that *eudaimonia*, a happy or well-lived life, consists in active communion with the *kalon* (the fine, the noble, the beautiful).¹⁰ Priam illustrates how we increasingly internalize and identify with the *kalon*. At first this consists primarily in "appropriate responsiveness to" the *kalon* as revealed in the actions, bearings, and lives of others, when we "recognize and delight in, to be amazed by, to want to emulate, and to imitate those exemplars" (43). As our communion with the fine and noble deepens, we may later come to "shine forth with the *kalon* ourselves" (43). Even

⁸ Bryan R. Warnick, *Imitation and Education* (New York: SUNY Press, 2008), <https://sunypress.edu/Books/I/Imitation-and-Education>.

⁹ Jonathan Lear, "Exemplars at the End of the World," in *Imagining the End: Mourning and Ethical Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022); Jonathan Lear, *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).

¹⁰ What we call "communion," is a Greek term (*koinônêsai*) that Lear first glosses as "participate," before more fully rendering as "act so as to be in community with" [Lear, "Exemplars," 43].

more specifically, Lear suggests, Priam exemplifies the *deep integrity* that results from this internalization of and identification with the *kalon*.

The concepts of character and virtue, Lear notes, already have the idea of resilience baked in. To be courageous, for example, does not mean that you can only call on this virtue in certain situations. Whatever you encounter, you respond—in perception, deliberation, and action—without giving fear too much, too little, or the wrong kind of weight. What Lear has in mind goes deeper. What if your world unravels as Priam’s does? “It is Priam’s fate,” Lear explains,

to “rule” over the destruction of his own kingdom and to suffer the killing of his beloved son Hector and the desecration of his body. Priam then begs Achilles, his son’s killer, for the body back. As Homer memorably has Priam say, “I have endured what no one on earth has ever done before—I put to my lips the hands of the man who killed my son.” (42)

The key word here is “endure.” For Priam, a blessed life, which requires both virtue and luck, is now out of the question. But virtue does not flee even this world-rending scene. Priam is kind to Helen and maintains dignity even as he pleads with Achilles (as Lear notes on p. 45). For Lear, this illustrates how the deep integrity of a virtuous person goes beyond the ability to rely on the virtues in wide-ranging and novel situations: “Aristotle insists that nothing—*nothing at all the external world can throw our way*—can altogether alienate us from the *kalon* once we have internalized it, that is, become virtuous” (43, emphasis original).

This is the *point* of the Priam example, but it is not its *function*. For the *Nicomachean Ethics* is not best understood as a theoretical text. It is essentially an edited version of lecture notes. As a pedagogical text, it is not simply advancing claims about the moral life: it is meant as a contribution to the moral education of those who attend the lectures. One way this has been understood squares the difference, noting that while the crucial early phase of character education amounts to pre-reflective habitualization, later phases require concepts to consolidate progress and orient one’s ongoing quest for fuller virtue.¹¹ With this much Lear agrees, arguing that “Aristotle’s intended audience are people who are very much en route to virtue” (44). Aristotle was trying to speak (and through the book form of his lectures perhaps still does) to

people who, to some extent, perhaps just a little, have already experienced the joy and delight and wonder of the *kalon*—as they have seen it in others—and have taken steps through practice and emulation to internalize it in themselves. (44, emphasis original)

On Lear’s reading, Aristotle is not only giving his students (and readers) concepts to think with: he is also giving them exemplars to live with. In bringing up Priam, he is not merely illustrating a theoretical claim. He is

installing the exemplar Priam in his students, along with a certain way of *taking up* Priam in thought, a certain way of conceiving him... Students thus acquire the capacity to return to Priam again and again in thought and imagination throughout the course of their lives. (44-45, emphasis original)

As we can already see, Lear’s account of exemplarity departs from conventional models according to which the goodness of a Priam inspires and instructs us to be good in similar ways.¹² We

¹¹ As the Jubilee center pithily summarizes this, virtue is first caught, then taught, then sought.

¹² Lamb, Brant, and Brooks add nuance, noting that exemplars may play five different roles: inspiring us to virtue; warning us against vice; helping us better understand what virtue entails; providing a proof of concept that a certain way of life is possible; and even rewire our situational apperception. See Michael

internalize his example through a process of identification. And what we internalize is not only an image of the exemplar himself, but also a way of making sense of his example, linking his demonstration of what is possible with our own growing sense of our own moral capabilities.¹³ We take in this example of a virtuous man “living through extraordinary misfortune” (45), an example that testifies to the fact that once communion with the *kalon* “has been achieved, nothing can completely destroy it in us” (43). And as we do “there is something about imagining the inalienability of the *kalon* that *rings true* and, in this way, builds confidence *in the present* in the robustness of the *kalon*” (45, emphasis original). This goes beyond admiration as such. We may admire Priam, but the important thing is how his example, through a special form of pedagogical “persuasiveness” (as Lear calls it) reconnects us with and deepens our love of nobility and goodness itself.

Lear’s vision of exemplarity seems to fit a quadratic structure: learner is forming a relationship to the good as triangulated through a potential exemplary figure. But this potential exemplar only becomes an actual exemplar through the further mediation of a fourth figure, the teacher who helps the learner draw these connections without letting any of these three points dissolve into the others.

Is Achilles an Exemplar Too?

There is another figure lurking in the shadow of the neat quadratic exemplarity equation: Achilles. In this section we would like to suggest there is no way of taking up Priam in thought, without also taking up Achilles. As Bernard Williams notes:

We cannot reach the psychology implicit in the Homeric poems merely by methods that neglect the fact that they are poems. But equally, much of their effect as the poems they are depends on their implied psychology. Above all, it depends precisely on the unity that I have been claiming for their characters: the unity of the person as thinking, acting, and bodily present the unity of the living and dead.¹⁴

Drawing Achilles into the equation, we follow Williams’ lead in two ways. First, we attempt to understand Achilles as he understands himself. Our aim is to see the character from the inside out. Second, we interpret Williams’ argument for the unity of form- the poem- as a species of an argument for contextual sensitivity to the dialogues that form us. In so doing we define dialogue capaciously an exchange with another. Priam’s fate is tied to Achilles.’ If his fate is to rule over a kingdom at its end, then Achilles’ is to bring disgrace upon Athens. Though interwoven and fated to collide in Homer’s *Iliad*, the wholeness of each character depends on the context of poem, the Greek ethos, and the internal state of the individual character. When we construct exemplars in this way what we find is a dialogic sense of integrity, where contextualized and vivid characters invite us into conversation about how to live a life oriented toward the good.

A dialogic sense of integrity, as we are imagining it, is the result of the unity found in narrative or scene, where disparate and diverse characters converge and depart with an emotional sense of “who one is and who one hopes to be.”¹⁵ For Williams shame, guilt, and honor are the emotions that mediate act, character, and consequence. A necessary identity is a way of being in the world and a way of seeing oneself as the kind of person one thinks is good and honorable. But honor and shame are always social situated. One shores up her sense of herself as a good judge, teacher, or leader in

Lamb, Jonathan Brant, and Edward Brooks, “How is Virtue Cultivated? Seven Strategies for Postgraduate Character Development,” *Journal of Character Education* 17, no. 1 (2021): 88.

¹³ This is similar to the fourth of the five roles, proof that a way of life is possible, that Lamb, Brant, and Brooks say that exemplars may serve in our moral education. See Michael Lamb, Jonathan Brant, and Edward Brooks, “How is Virtue Cultivated? Seven Strategies for Postgraduate Character Development,” *Journal of Character Education* 17, no. 1 (2021): 88.

¹⁴ Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity*, Second edition (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2008), 49.

¹⁵ Williams, *Shame and Necessity*.

the context of others she admires. Though our sense of the good may radiate out from within these ways of being, we first understand the good in dialogue with others who we think deserve our respect.

Ajax is an example of this sort. When Achilles dies, Ajax feels that he deserves his armor. The kings decide otherwise; this angers Ajax, so he sets out to kill the kings and Odysseus (who received the armor). Deluded by the gods, Ajax ends up killing cattle (who appeared to him as human) and their herdsman. Ashamed of his actions, Ajax feels that he *must* kill himself. He, a warrior, cannot go on living as one who has killed without cause. Ajax's necessity is an internal must grounded in his ethos, projects, and individual nature of the warrior he aspires to be. Williams writes:

The source of the necessity is in the agent, an internalized other whose view the agent can respect. Indeed he can identify with this figure, and the respect is to that extent self-respect; but at the same time the figure remains a genuine other, the embodiment of a real social expectation.¹⁶

Achilles' must is drawn from a similar, though not identical, well as Ajax. Achilles is bound to a different set of projects and constituted by a different nature, but he too is a moral agent tasked with balancing necessity and liberty. Achilles, like Ajax and Priam, asks himself what is it for me to go on? What actions must I take to satisfy my view of a life worth living? Following Patroclus' death Achilles contemplates returning to the battlefield:

My mother, the god has given me these weapons; they are such as are the work of immortals...Therefore I shall arm myself in them. Yet I am sadly afraid, during this time, for the warlike son of Menoitios [Patroclus] that flies might get into the wounds... and breed worms. (19.20-25)

Only after Theitis agrees to preserve Patroclus' body does Achilles re-join the battle. In another example, when Achilles refuses Hector's plea to treat the dead challenger's body with honor, he does so out of unyielding grief and in full knowledge that his actions will herald his own misfortune. Why does he persist? Part of the answer, says Williams is that the only action Achilles could respect was one that accurately pictured his outrage at his friend's death. It couldn't have been otherwise. This is Achilles:

Remember every valor of yours, for now the need comes hardest upon you to be a spearman and a bold warrior. There shall be no more escape for you... You will pay in a lump for all those sorrows of my companions you killed in your spear's fury. (22. 268-272)

Nearly every philosophical strand of ethics would condemn Achilles on account of his anger: his anger rules where rationality should.¹⁷ For example, existentialists might say, Achilles could have chosen a different course of action. After all, Priam is an exemplar because in thought and deed, he pushed aside his righteous anger at his son's death and desecration. But this is Priam's fate. It is the path that fits his projects, the ethos of nobility, and his sense of self. Achilles is a different character whose exchanges with Priam are interpolated through his sense of a life worth living. Achilles cannot be Priam. What is more troubling is that Achilles' integration of the kalon may run afoul of Priam's. If the kalon is a digestion of the fine, good, or beautiful into the internalized other-- the embodiment of the social or moral order-- then moral agency bound to look different from different angles. Well, yes. But that doesn't mean we cannot say anything about the objective status of moral agent. This is not a spurious call for relativity.

Rather, if a moral life results from the Aristotelian arch-- appropriate responsiveness to the kalon, emulation of those who live in relationship to the kalon, and taking up the kalon for one's self-- its

¹⁶ Williams, *Shame and Necessity*, 103.

¹⁷ Glen Pettigrove and Koji Tanaka, "Anger and Moral Judgment," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 92, no. 2 (April 3, 2014): 269–86, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00048402.2013.795990>; Benoît Dubreuil, "Anger and Morality," *Topoi* 34, no. 2 (October 1, 2015): 475–82, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11245-014-9238-7>.

viability is the result of asking how a character understands and then crafts an ethical life of meaning. Baked into the ethical turn toward Aristotle, says Williams, is a drive to find theory of ethics that sees humans as formed by the society in which they grow up. This is a more holistic vision than deontology, for example. But a deceptive kind of wholeness survives in Aristotle too. In Williams interpretation this is, “the idea that the relations of human beings to society and to each other, if properly understood and properly enacted, can realize a harmonious identity that involves no real loss.”¹⁸ Loss, alienation, misalignment, and shame are part of the game, says Williams. No matter what we learn about psychology, history, or biology, the world will always be “partially intelligible to human agency” and “not necessarily well adjusted to ethical aspirations.”¹⁹

Achilles demonstrates vividly the partial intelligibility of human agency. In fact, the thing about Achilles that gums up the pretty description of Priam’s staid and rational endurance is that Achilles deliberates in his anger. Barbara Koziak writes that, “anger surges within his [Achilles’] thumos; but surprisingly, so does some kind of deliberation.”²⁰ Early on in poem Achilles is described as “weighing in mind and spirit [thumos] these two courses . . .’ (1.193).²¹ And late at the climax of the epic, following the death of Hector, Achilles’ contemplate how to proceed: “Why does my heart debate such things?” (22.385). Unlike the static separation of emotion and reason that we may see in interpretations of Plato or later psychoanalytic theory, in Homer’s *Iliad*, thumos is an agent of reflection. While thumos is usually translated as spiritedness or emotion, Koziak suggests that it might be better understood as something like an intuitive sense of one’s self. As she puts it: “thumos is the site, location, the interior mental but quasi-physical part where emotions happen. That is why the translation “heart” often makes sense, except that the Greeks had other words for the organ that pumps blood through the body.”²² Thumos is your gut or intuition; it is a site of emotion and reason; a place where your personal projects come matter.²³

Framing thumos as central to the moral activity of Achilles allows us to see better, but not perfectly, how Achilles understood his moral agency. His anger was a matter of identity. To not be angry in this way, was to not be Achilles. Moreover, Achilles choses his actions knowing that they are out of step with society. Loss was internal to Achilles life, and not just the loss of his friend Patroclus. As a warrior Achilles understood that the social harmony of a empire was precariously dependent on the existence of individuals whose lives were crafted around protecting the peace. (Plato knew this too. For example, In Book II of the Republic his description of the warrior class --the noble puppy— acknowledges that warriors will need a special education in deliberative thumos.)²⁴

A dialogic sense of integrity invites us to understand characters from the inside out and in so doing creates a rupture through which we can see how a person has crafted a life that he/she/they can respect. The upshot about Achilles is that he too is an exemplar, even if he is the cause of Priam’s pain. He is a model warrior. If his actions at times signal excess, then it is on us to reframe the ethos of the warrior life now, but not to interpolate his world through our ethical desires. Moreover, it is worth noting that both Priam and Achilles were fated to their course. And although, we moderns are want to write off fatalist descriptions of life, fate for the ancients functions much as luck does for us. In this way

¹⁸ Williams, *Shame and Necessity*, 162.

¹⁹ Williams, 164.

²⁰ Barbara Koziak, *Retrieving Political Emotion: “Thumos,” Aristotle, and Gender*, 1 edition (University Park, Pa: Penn State University Press, 2000), 1077.

²¹ Homer, *The Iliad of Homer*, trans. Richmond Lattimore (Chicago ; London: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

²² Koziak, *Retrieving Political Emotion*, 1073.

²³ Perhaps worth exploring later: the relationship of thumos to the affective framing of emulation.

²⁴ Samantha Deane and Amy Shuffelton, “Plato and the Police: Dogs, Guardians, and Why Accountability Is the Wrong Answer,” *Educational Studies: Journal of the American Educational Studies Association* 52, no. 6 (2016): 491–505, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131946.2016.1231683>.

our ethical situation is “more like human beings in antiquity than any Western people have been in the meantime.”²⁵

On one hand our point is rather simple, Achilles’ project is framed by Priam’s and Priam’s frames Achilles. Thus, if we are going to set Priam up as the exemplar, we must take care to understand the dialogic scene that makes his project, sense of self, and ethos intelligible. The more complex point is that resuscitation of an exemplar—the fleshing out of the exemplar in our mind—is part of how we give shape to our internalized other. In other words, who we become is a matter of the kind of conversations we have with exemplars as we domesticate them.

Dialectical virtue

It is well accepted that progress in the moral life depends in significant part on the availability of moral exemplars. As in most spheres of learning, showing beats telling. What is less well understood is what initiates do with the examples they encounter. The moral psychology of emulation—the who, what, and how of it—remains underdeveloped.

With her *Exemplarist Moral Theory* Linda Zagzebski’s has kicked off a debate over the “who” of emulation. Zagzebski’s exemplars are the saints, heroes, and sages “who show us the upper limit of human capability.”²⁶ For Jonathan Lear, this glosses over the crucial mediating role of “local exemplars,” who find anew in the present the living force of a tradition’s defining figures. Without them, traditions fossilize into traditionalism.²⁷

Turning to the “what” of emulation, there is general agreement that mere mimicry won’t cut it. If you are only imitating outward behavior then you are not really learning moral conduct, which involves doing the right thing for the right reason. Indeed, given that situational sensitivity and responsiveness are key to acting and living well, there is also the possibility of moral miseducation if initiates think that following an example means learning a universal rule of conduct. My grandfather never raised his voice, the initiate observes admiringly. To this we would want to reply that it is unlikely that your grandfather had the mean clearly in view, that is feeling anger toward the right things, for the right reasons, and to the right degree in light of what the situation demands. However, if emulation involves the whole kit and kaboodle of moral conduct (perception-feeling-judgment-action), then we encounter what the “it takes one to know one” problem. For it seems that picking out what is exemplary requires the very emotional maturity, perceptual acuity, and wisdom that emulation is supposed to engender.

This circularity problem points us to further open question about emulation, the role of the initiate’s agency in the process.²⁸ On this question, discussions of emulation reveal a noticeable ambivalence. At one extreme, the process is driven by the initiate’s own sense of what is worthy to become. To put the matter baldly, initiates use exemplars to achieve their own ends. At the other extreme, central to what is being emulated is the exemplar’s own embodied answer to the question of what is

²⁵ Williams, *Shame and Necessity*, 166.

²⁶ Linda Zagzebski, *Exemplarist Moral Theory*, 1, cited in Wouter Sanderse, “Adolescents’ moral self-cultivation through emulation: Implications for modelling in moral education,” *Journal of Moral Education* (DOI: [10.1080/03057240.2023.2236314](https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240.2023.2236314)), 4. Here Sanderse cites some of the critics of Zagzebski’s high bar.

²⁷ Jonathan Lear, “Exemplars at the End of the World,” in *Imagining the End: Mourning and Ethical Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022), 46-48.

²⁸ We focus on agency but there are many interesting questions about the logic of emulation: Should we think of emulation as an action, an emotion, a virtue? To what degree is emulation intentional? To what extent, cognitive? If emulation is an emotion, what are its defining feeling-tones: admiration, awe, ambition, envy, shame? Does emulation refer to trying to live up to or trying to surpass? And so on.

worth wanting.²⁹ The former crashes into the problem of circularity. The latter leaves no room for the place of, not to mince words, *originality* in the moral life.

The *locus classicus* here is Emerson, especially “Self-Reliance” which begins with an evocation of emulation. For Emerson, emulation involves self-knowledge. It is a moment of recognition signaled by a sense of shame. However, what induces this shame in me is not seeing you do better (e.g., acting kindly or justly) what all agree we ought to do. Rather, it is that your willingness to belt the song of yourself throws in my face my own self-muting.

Is there a way to retain the Aristotelian stress on the developmental importance of emulation and ethos (call it the communitarian pushback on the untenable atomism and voluntarism of modern liberalism’s anthropology), without losing this idea of originality? We think so. However, we want to modify Emerson’s account, which seems to rely on a romantic idea of the true self, prior to all socialization. Instead, we want to acknowledge the Oakeshottian insight that “each of us inhabits a corner of the earth, lapped round with locality.”³⁰ By the time we are self-aware, what we are aware of is a self that is already defined by “its place in . . . an identifiable mode of imagining” about what matters in life and what it means to live well.³¹ That the task of self-cultivation is always framed by the formative resources available in one’s corner of the earth entails neither that moral formation is passive nor that personhood (within a given parish) is generic. First, local cultures are never uniform. Each corner frames multiple ideas of what is worth wanting, multiple ideas of what it might be fulfilling to do or admirable to become. Agency not only shows up in the inevitable process of selection, but also in the fact that in order to make use of these resources we must make sense of them, something that no one can do for us.

In the interest of space, let one rich example suffice, that of the late US Supreme Court Justice, Ruth Bader Ginsberg (RBG as she was known). The most important exemplar for RBG was her mother, from whom she inherited a two-part ethical imperative: (1) be independent; (2) be a lady. Growing up in the 1940s, when being a lady meant being proper and respectable, deferential and dependent, this double injunction was paradoxical to say the least. To many, the solution might seem obvious. Given two contradictory injunctions, one which seems like baggage from a bygone era and the other like a sign of changing times, we would not blame RBG for simply stowing the inconvenient part of this inheritance in the basement. RBG took the harder path of crafting a life in which she could pursue both ideals. Even here, there is an easier and harder route. The easier is to divide her life into two compartments, one for the expression of her independent spirit and another for her ladylike behavior. What RBG did instead was find a way to interpret the two ideals as not only compatible but as completely interwoven. RBG understood ladylikeness not as polite decorum and gender subservience, but as another kind of modesty and restraint: “My mother’s advice was don’t lose time on useless emotions. Like, anger, resentment, remorse, envy.”³² RBG wanted to stand on her two feet and occupy a place in the world. Ladylike deference would not achieve this, but if genteel

²⁹ This dilemma cannot be dissolved by distinguishing between an earlier more passive phase of moral formation. Either the agency of the later active phase is ultimately heteronomous, or there is puzzle over the transition, namely how one whose beliefs and desires have been shaped by past exemplars can suddenly find an independence of judgment over who and what to emulate and to what ends.

³⁰ Oakeshott, “A Place of Learning,” in *The Voice of Liberal Learning*: Michael Oakeshott on Education, ed. Timothy Fuller (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989),

³¹ Michael Oakeshott, “The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind,” in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, ed. Timothy Fuller (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Press [1959] 1991), 496.

³² Ginsburg in Jeffrey Rosen and Ruth Bader Ginsburg, “RBG on Life, Love, Liberty, and Law,” *We the People* (podcast), December 19, 2019 (<https://constitutioncenter.org/news-debate/podcasts/rbg-on-life-love-liberty-and-law>), 6:26.

restraint could be directed inward at what Buddhists call the “monkey brain,” that could certainly help. “If I don’t get past unproductive emotions,” RBG explained, “I’ll just get bogged down and lose precious time from useful work.”³³

For many, parental ideals remain something leaden and inert, a guilty pull from the past. By contrast, RBG reworked her inheritance into a portable and livable form transformed by and transformative of the times in which her life would unfold. After all, as Gertrude Stein once asked, “what good are roots if you cannot take them with you?”³⁴ Thus, even while RBG had, like all of us, to build her moral compass out of limited materials, circumscribed to time and place, her inventive soulcraft offers us something to emulate in turn. This is Emersonian in that what moves us is not an example of a good person (which is not to say that she wasn’t one) but a good example of a person. Without denying that there may be universal features of psychic life, or at least common cultural patterns of psychological conflict, the puzzle of integrity ultimately differs for each individual, and there is even more room for divergence in the solutions. Each person is, if you will, a different way of holding oneself together. There is something moving about how each human magpie finds the materials to piece themselves together; how each bridges conflicts, lives with tensions, deals with disavowals. The very effort to forge and sustain a differentiated integrity, to face up to inconvenient truths, to imaginatively rework one’s inherited formative resources can inspire the efforts of others. Soul action resounds.

³³ Ginsburg, quoted in Jeffrey Rosen, *Conversations with RBG: Ruth Bader Ginsburg on Life, Love, Liberty, and Law* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2019), 224.

³⁴ Gertrude Stein, quoted in Helen Molesworth, “Imaginary Landscape,” in *Leap before You Look: Black Mountain College, 1933–1957*, ed. Helen Molesworth (Boston: Institute for Contemporary Art, 2015), 51.

